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SUBJECT: ECONOMIC WOES TRUMP POLITICS IN FLOOD-HIT
BANGLADESHI VILLAGES

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Much of northcentral Bangladesh remains under water from monsoon rains that began in August. A recent three-day visit to the region by PolOff found much dissatisfaction with the caretaker government, which villagers blame for spotty relief efforts and rapidly increasing prices. As they struggle to survive they show little interest in political developments in Dhaka, particularly the arrest on graft charges of the women who have long led the country's two main political parties. Barring further precipitous increases in prices, anecdotal evidence from the trip suggests outbreaks of violent anti-government protests that shook Bangladeshi cities last month are not likely in the countryside. End Summary.

¶2. (U) A visit to Tangail and Sirajganj northwest of Dhaka on September 10-12 showed plenty of signs of flood devastation. Much of the trip was on a raised main road surrounded by flooded cropland as far as the eye could see. Sections of several secondary roads were washed away. In Sirajganj city, one of the worst hit regions, downtown strd%ds were flooded calf-deep; a few boats plied the streets alongside cars and rickshaws. Water lapped at the feet of legal scribes seated at rickety desks set up on the street outside the courthouse.

The view from the building's third floor was of a temporary lake whose shoreline was a row of corrugated-metal homes, their green and red doors half submerged in the water.

¶3. (U) Economic hardship was foremost on villagers' minds. Much of this was the result of flooding. At Basail subdistrict near Tangail, officials said 80,000 of 180,000 people were affected, with nearly 300 homes and more than 10,000 acres of crops damaged by flooding. The government provided assistance primarily of rice and cash grants of up to taka 500 (about \$US7) per family. Villagers there and elsewhere gave varying answers when asked how relief efforts compared with previous years, ranging from general satisfaction to claims that they were getting either far less than needed or nothing at all. They spoke in a unified agitated voice, however, when identifying inflation as a scourge. Many rattled off prices of essential foodstuffs compared with a year earlier, reflecting an almost doubling of cost for rice, potatoes and edible oils. Many expect prices to go higher still during the month of Ramadan, which began September 13.

¶4. (U) Villagers seemed much more subdued when talking about politics. Many Dhaka-based Bangladeshi journalists argue that Sheik Hasina and Khaleda Zia, the charismatic leaders of the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, remain hugely popular in the countryside despite being jailed on corruption charges but villagers had little to say in support

of them. At a family-planning clinic in Baisal, a group of eight women in the waiting room nodded in agreement when one said the arrest of the two ladies would be acceptable if the graft allegations were proven. The women expressed anger at the two parties for their incessant street fighting when in power and urged national unity, echoing reasons cited by the military-supported caretaker government in canceling elections and imposing an indefinite state of emergency in January. At a separate village just outside Sirajganj, a group of men ignored a question about the two ladies to focus on their complaints about prices.

¶5. (U) A visit to Mukundakati, a conservative village of weavers hard hit by floodwaters near Sirajganj, appeared particularly representative. The devastation was clear on the approach to the village, which was surrounded by floodwaters that looked like a vast ocean complete with an armada of makeshift canoes, rafts, sampans and single-sail junks. About two dozen weavers explained how many of their looms were destroyed by the flood, putting them out of work just as Ramadan, typically their busiest season, was starting. They said they received five kilograms of rice this year in relief, compared with 15 kilograms in the past. They also said that they had not yet received any government loans for looms as they had during previous bad flooding. Some were getting by through personal loans and by selling cows and cows' milk. They expressed unhappiness with the government relief response, but as one villager, Rafiqul Islam, said with a shrug: "What can we do?"

¶6. (SBU) When asked if they were familiar with the anti-government protests at Dhaka University and elsewhere, the weavers all nodded yes. But Islam, wearing a long-sleeved shirt that read, "The Early Sisties (sic) California was the Paradise of Surf," said neither the

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violence by the students nor the response by the police was acceptable. Students should be studying, not rioting, he said. When asked about the arrest of the two ladies, he said they have to account for their activities in the past and that government action against them could help establish a culture of accountability in a nation where graft is endemic.

He and others also stressed that they would like the government to hold elections, which have been promised by the end of next year, as soon as possible.

¶7. (SBU) Conclusion: Although care is needed when drawing conclusions from anecdotal evidence and a limited number of discussions, PolOff did not detect among destitute flood victims a level of anger that would translate into imminent political protest. Villagers seemed resigned to their fate concerning the floodwaters that afflict the region with depressing regularity but were upset about skyrocketing prices, which some called the highest in memory. Anger over inflation helped stoke the anti-government Dhaka protests and national officials have promised to take measures to keep prices in check during Ramadan. Should inflation nevertheless continue to soar, the situation in Bangladesh's flood-soaked villages could yet turn combustible.

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